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STAT ARMS TO IRAN: 'HOW QUICKLY WE FORGET'
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WASHINGTON

The State Department acknowledges secret meetings with Iranian contacts and the CIA director admits that on orders of the president, Congress was left in the dark about efforts to free American hostages.

If it sounds familiar, it should. But the crisis is not Ronald Reagan's.

In this case, it belongs to Jimmy Carter.

STAT 'Secret Iran Maneuvers; How Quickly We Forget' is the headline on the article written by CIA veteran Edward Sayle for the latest edition of Periscope, a journal of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers.

Sayle, the editor of Periscope and historian for the organization, authored the piece as a retrospective on the Iranian hostage crisis and scandal endured by President Carter years before his successor stumbled into a similar swamp.

Carter's case began in secret negotiations for the release of 52 American hostages held by Islamic militants in the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. It followed his disastrous covert air operation to free the hostages in which eight U.S. Air Force and Marine personnel were killed in the Iranian desert when two rescue aircraft collided.

It ended, or at least saw its goal achieved, only when the hostages were freed Jan. 20, 1980, after 444 days in Tehran -- and after Reagan was sworn in to succeed the president whose envisioned second term died in the cross fire.

'The fate of 52 American hostages seized in Iran tugged at the nation's heart strings,' Sayle wrote. 'The nation recognized and accepted that something dramatic, be it diplomatic or military, had to be done to break the impasse and bring the American prisoners home.'

'President Carter carried the burden of what appeared to be a diminished and powerless presidency as a penalty for inaction.'

The media reported that a secret deal was in the works and that the hostages would be released in exchange for five planeloads of military spare parts.

'The press claimed to have located the anticipated shipment in a warehouse at McGuire Air Force Base,' Sayle wrote, 'and a Pentagon spokesman made the frank admission the materiel there was indeed intended for Iran. But, he said, the parts were ones that had been signed over to the Iranians before the hostage crisis began and were stored at McGuire.'

State Department spokesman John Trattner, the story continued, 'acknowledged that the administration intended to resume the shipment of military parts once the hostages were released.'

The militants who seized the U.S. Embassy Nov. 4, 1979, took the hostages as ransom for the return of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi to stand trial. The shah had fled to the United States the previous month as the Islamic revolution of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini gained strength.

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The United States would not give the seriously ill shah indefinite haven, and he went to Panama and then to Egypt, where he died of cancer July 27, 1980.

The Carter administration began negotiating with Khomeini's regime through Algerian diplomats and offered to deliver between \$5 billion and \$6 billion of frozen Iranian assets in return for the hostages. Arbitration by an international panel would handle other assets or claims in dispute.

In fact, \$8 billion in Iranian assets held by the United States were unfrozen after the hostages were freed. Negotiations continue today for other sums.

Carter eventually signed a secret presidential 'finding' that authorized the dispatch of a CIA agent to Tehran 'at high risk to his life' to engineer the successful escape of six Americans who had hidden in the Canadian Embassy, Sayle wrote.

CIA personnel also flew a light plane into the Iranian desert, landing by moonlight, to establish if the area could handle larger cargo planes.

'Other CIA personnel went repeatedly into hostile Tehran to survey what the military rescue force would find on their arrival and to purchase the trucks to transport the raiding party to the beleaguered embassy,' Sayle wrote.

Congress, however, was told none of this -- and Carter's CIA director, Adm. Stansfield Turner, recently recalled three instances in which lawmakers were deliberately not told of secret efforts to free the hostages, Sayle wrote.

'In these instances,' he quoted Turner as saying, 'the information was so tightly held that had the full intelligence committees of the Congress been informed, more people on Capitol Hill would have known about the operation than inside the CIA!'

Sayle concluded: 'Press speculation of the time faded into history like a bad memory after the ultimate release of the hostages. ... How quickly we forget.'